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Not Taps But Reveille

Robert Gordon Anderson

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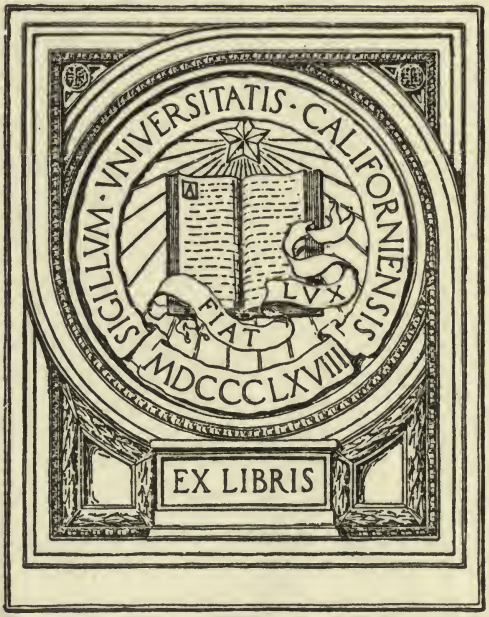
GIFT OF
Irene Hudson



Irene Hudson

Christmas 1918
"The Rieks"

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Not Taps, But Reveille

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BY

ROBERT GORDON ANDERSON

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Gift of
Irene Hudson

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In Memoriam

LIEUTENANT W. L. M.

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Not Taps, But Reveille

UNIV. OF CALIFORNIA

Not Taps, But Reveille

IT was a little house on a plain street. Yet as I entered the gate to-night, I closed it gently, reverently, for I suddenly realized that the little house had the dignity of a great mansion, the majesty of a royal palace.

A messenger had entered that gate four days before. He was only a little boy in the blue Western Union uniform, loitering along the sidewalk and whistling as he went, so little realizing the import of the message he carried—that

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message which has been brought to so many homes by so many messengers throughout the ages.

Whistling still, he looked at the number on the house, below the Stars and Stripes and the service flag, and then at the address on the envelope he bore.

A girl answered the bell. Trembling, she opened the yellow envelope. The typewritten words gave the name of an aviation camp in the far-off South and the news that a boy had fallen to his death a few hours before.

It was her only brother and she blindly groped her way up the stairs

to the widowed mother and the two younger sisters who had not yet heard the messenger enter.

And the lights burned all that night in the little house.

Three days later a flag-covered form had been tenderly carried across the threshold for the last time.

All that day the presence of the boy seemed to be with me. It was not because Death had brought to him that dignity which the great adventure brings even to a mean life at its end. There was no glory there that had not been there before.

This young lieutenant who gave his life for his country needed no idealization. He had all the graces of the youths of whom the old pagans used to say: "Whom the Gods love die young."

But better even than this beautiful proverb of the cultured Greeks was the old colored mammy's reply to her mistress mourning over the young soldier.

"Why should such a noble life be taken and the others left?" was the anguished question.

And the old colored woman, with that childlike faith which is the greatest of all, had answered:

"We always pick the beautiful flowers."

It might have served as an epitaph for the young soldier—his spirit was as beautiful as it was heroic.

Picture after picture flashes before me. The summer days when he rose at five and ran for the tennis courts for an hour of tennis before the day's work, his laugh ringing out as the golden sun rim came up over the buildings that walled the court. Somehow he and the Sun were always "pals."

And then his keen, vital interest in his job—real estate. The building of homes, the selling of lots,

the management of the office—all of the day's work was just as much of a game, a keen honest game, to him as the tennis at dawn.

And dances too. Many an evening we have seen him, and very handsome in his evening clothes he looked—slender, and erect, with a spring in his step, and a chuckle in his voice that echoed the gleam in his brown eye.

Yes, he was debonair and handsome, and the girls and older women too couldn't help turning their heads to look after him when he passed.

But most of his attentions were showered on his three sisters, and

his widowed mother. "Mother o' Mine" he called her—that brave Christian gentle-woman with the prematurely white hair and from whom he inherited those brown eyes and so much of his bright personality. Laughingly he used to say he was cut out for a bachelor, but those who knew him best always believed the jest covered a vow he had made deep in his heart, always to look after that mother and the three fatherless girls, all younger than he.

Since the great war has come home to us, there has been a spiritual quickening in our young men.

But even in the days before 1917 when Youth thought little but of sports, and dances, and theater-parties, and automobiles, he was a Christian gentleman. The boys called him "white clean through" —but isn't that after all only their unconscious definition of a Christian gentleman?

No, Death has not brought a glory to this young life that was not his before. It is easy to realize it now. It had been just as with the sunshine, which warms us as we go about our daily tasks. We think of its beneficent, golden presence but once in a while—until it

is gone. The sunshine of his beautiful spirit had been with us all the while, although we did not realize its full beauty until taken from us.

And so the gate closed behind me to-night and I ascended the stairs to the little room where the mother sat with a letter in her lap, the one he had written when he had enlisted.

As I clasped her hand in mine I tried to tell her,—haltingly, for her grief almost blinded my own eyes and choked my voice,—of the comforting things I had thought of in the bright daylight:—she was more blessed than most mothers, twenty-six years of his useful, beautiful life

had been hers, and now he had fallen in the service of his country. Many things I told her—the old, old truths that have been so often uttered in the homes of sorrow and which, at least this time, were all so true.

Then she gave me the letter which she had held all that day, almost as if the envelope contained the very spirit of her boy. When I read it aloud, as she asked me to do, I found in it a greater truth than any I could utter.

It was dated in June, written while he was away from home and just before he had volunteered, and

in phrases, which for all their boyishness or perhaps because of it, were beautiful, told of the reasons why he had offered his life for his country.

It was rather for the world he offered his life, for he said so much was at stake in this struggle—that it was for the whole future of the human race. Such phrases are impressive in a newspaper editorial, but how sublime they become when penned by a boy who backed them up with his life.

Towards the end I found in this phrase a key to all this life of ours and the life beyond: "We know,

Mother, that Death is but the door to something infinitely better."

The wise men of the ages could have said nothing more.

Reverently I placed the letter in her lap and left her.

And if I had ever doubted, I would have found faith now, that the brave-hearted boy had really not left us. The bright eye might have been dimmed, the merry voice stilled, when at the grave this afternoon those rifle-volleys woke the echoes of the Jersey hills, and the bugler played the last beautiful call beside the flag-draped form before it was forever hidden from our

mortal eyes,—but somewhere in that infinitely better life he wrote about and in the hearts of all who ever knew him, his spirit still lives.

. . . . . .

Blow again, bugle, blow once more—not the beautiful but sorrowing strains of Taps with which we laid him to rest—but the glorious notes of a divine Reveille for one who wakes to see the Sun—for one who faces the Morning!

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